

Using authentic assessment to document the emerging literacy skills of young children.

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Geographic Code: 1USA
Date: Dec 22, 2001
Words: 2317
Publication: Childhood Education
ISSN: 0009-4056

Upon entering the classroom of 5-year-olds, a buzz of activity captures the visitor's attention. Children working in small groups are busily pursuing a number of activities. One group is drawing illustrations for the big book that the class wrote describing their trip to Pizza Hut. Another group is creating menus for the restaurant they are setting up in the dramatic play area. "Don't forget to put 'We have pepperoni' on your menu," one child says. The other children nod their heads and continue drawing and writing on their papers. One child is bent over a large sheet of construction paper, marker in hand. He is carefully copying the words "Pizza Hut" from the word wall the children have created. When finished, he tapes the paper to two chairs he has placed in front of the dramatic play area. "Here's the sign," he tells the others. Three other children are looking at a recipe book, discussing the "ingredients" they will need to make the pizzas. Another group is looking at books about restaurants in the literacy corner.

These are some typical functional reading and writing activities that one would find in early childhood classrooms throughout the United States. The children are demonstrating their understanding of reading and writing through purposeful experiences. Accurately and appropriately assessing the progress of young children's literacy development is a challenge, however. The teacher must select a type of assessment that will document what the child can do, as well as what the child knows. There are many types of authentic or performance assessments a teacher could use to document the skills being demonstrated by the children in this classroom: checklists, anecdotal notes, videotapes, and work samples are some of the ways to accurately document, in a realistic setting, the children's behaviors and skills.

Checklist

A checklist is a list of sequential skills or behaviors arranged into categories and used to determine whether a child exhibits the behaviors or skills listed (Mandell, 2001; Puckett & Black, 1994; Wortham, 2001). Teachers can quickly and easily observe groups of children, and check the behavior or skill each child is demonstrating at a particular moment. A number of published checklists have been developed by researchers and leading authorities within the field. The teacher may choose to use one of these, or create a new one based on the unique goals of the program.

A checklist can document the many forms of children's emerging reading and writing skills. For example, the children from the featured classroom who are drawing illustrations for the big book are demonstrating the understanding that illustrations and text are related. Their teacher could easily mark on a checklist which children are able to draw pictures that relate to the printed text.

The same checklist could be used to document the children's writing skills as they work on the menus and the sign. Careful observation will allow the teacher to quickly determine if the children are writing from left to right, using capital and/or lower-case letters, creating spaces between words, showing an understanding that print has a purpose, and demonstrating any other skills listed on the checklist. The teacher places a check by observed skills or behaviors. As the teacher moves throughout the classroom, she / he can easily document the presence--or absence--of a variety of literacy skills.

When using checklists, it is important to remember that the skills, and the sequence in which they are listed, are only guidelines. Each child has her / his own developmental timetable and may or may not be capable of using certain skills. It is also important to remember that the checklist only documents the absence or presence of the skill or behavior during the time of the observation. It does not mean that the skill or behavior is not part of the child's repertoire.

Anecdotal Notes/Observations

Although checklists are easy to use, they cannot capture the richness or depth of children's interactions as they engage in literacy activities. Therefore, the teacher may want to use anecdotal notes / observations to gather more details. Anecdotal notes/observations are written descriptions that provide a short, objective account of an event or incident. Only the facts are reported--what happened, and when and where it occurred. This type of information can be used to provide insights that will help the teacher more fully understand a child's behavior or use of skills. Anecdotal notes/observations are especially useful for documenting interesting, humorous, and/or significant incidents involving individual children (Puckett & Black, 1994; Wortham, 2001).

The teacher of the classroom described in the opening scenario might have chosen to use anecdotal notes to record how one of the children went about making the Pizza Hut sign. Although only factual information is recorded during the observation, the teacher may want to reflect upon the incident at a later time, to put the incident into a context for this particular child.

The above anecdotal note/observation provides details that cannot be reflected in a checklist. The teacher was able to capture the intensity of Mark's effort, as well as specific information regarding the strategies he used to accomplish the task.

Videotape

Of course, this entire episode, or any of the other activities, could be videotaped. Although anecdotal notes may provide more details, the videotape can show an incident from beginning to end, capturing all of the children's use of language, as well as their expressions and subtle actions that otherwise could be missed while the teacher is jotting down notes. The teacher can then

review the videotapes when time permits and record the information using checklists and/or anecdotal notes. The teacher may decide to keep the videotaped incident to share with parents at conference time, or reuse the tape.

Audiotape

If video equipment is not available, a tape recorder can be a useful assessment tool. Audiotapes of children's conversations are especially valuable if the teacher wants information about their language development. An audiotape of the three children from the opening paragraph who were looking at the recipe book and discussing ingredients could provide the teacher with a wealth of information regarding the children's vocabulary and their knowledge of sentence structure, verb tense, enunciation, etc. Again, the teacher could listen to the tape when time permits, document the information, and then decide whether to save the recorded incident or tape over it.

Work Samples

Work samples provide another powerful example of what children can do, offering the teacher opportunities to assess children's behaviors and understandings as they engage in authentic experiences. All teachers understand the importance of collecting and carefully assessing children's written work. In the beginning scenario, the teacher would have access to the children's illustrations, the menus they created, and Mark's Pizza Hut sign. The teacher then could document any skills demonstrated on the prepared checklist, or she could choose to write a short anecdotal reflection.

Selecting the Strategy

The biggest challenge for teachers of young children is deciding how to obtain the needed information about their literacy development. The teacher must review the activities that are planned for the day and determine which assessment strategy or strategies would be most appropriate.

In the opening scenario, the teacher and children had decided to create their own restaurant. The day before, they had brainstormed all the things they would need to create and "run" the restaurant. Based on this discussion, the teacher realized that children would be engaged in many different experiences. Therefore, she decided to use her literacy checklist to document the emerging reading and writing skills the children were demonstrating. She also slipped into the literacy corner and turned on the tape recorder while the children were discussing "gredients" for their pizza. She chose to use an anecdotal note to record how Mark created the Pizza Hut sign. By keeping note cards and a pencil in her pocket, she was able to easily record the incident and then, using the checklist, continue the assessments. To determine the most appropriate assessment instrument to use for each situation, this teacher determined what she wanted to assess and considered the most efficient and effective means for recording that information.

Implementing the Strategy

Regardless of which types of assessment methods are chosen, the teacher must schedule time to

review and reflect on the collected information. For an authentic assessment approach to be successful, a teacher must take time to think about what children already know and are able to do, and about what skills they will need to develop further. Teachers need time to determine children's interests, abilities, and any areas of concern. Regularly scheduling a time to review and reflect will allow teachers to achieve the insight they need to develop a clear understanding of the progress each child is making, and to plan appropriate experiences that develop a positive attitude toward reading and writing, along with the necessary skills and understandings.

Over time, the teacher's ability to authentically assess children's emerging literacy skills will improve, and the process then becomes a natural part of daily life in the classroom. A slow, manageable, informed approach for using authentic or performance assessment to document children's emerging literacy then can be expanded into all curriculum areas. As teachers feel more comfortable and confident, more methods can be added to their assessment repertoire. The use of authentic or performance assessment will provide a more complete picture of children's progress in all areas of development.

An additional benefit to using authentic assessment is that the teacher can share information he or she collects regarding a child's progress with the family. Family members enjoy seeing their child on video or in photographs, as well as samples of his/her work. Furthermore, the teacher has concrete evidence of progress to share with the family. As the teacher is discussing the progress the child is demonstrating, she/he can show the family actual evidence of that progress. This helps families to better understand what the teacher is assessing and how the child is demonstrating the skill(s).

Using authentic assessment strategies to document children's emerging literacy skills is time-consuming, and may appear to be an overwhelming task for teachers. With time and practice, however, the use of authentic assessment methods can become a natural, daily part of classroom life.

Nov. 14, 2000

Mark center time

(had announced during planning time that he would make the sign for our Pizza Hut restaurant)
Alone at table, with a large sheet of construction paper and red marker Looks up from work, points to word wall, squints when saying "p" points to "p" written on paper with the marker he is holding "i" "z" (follows same procedure as before), stops, looks at word wall, bends down over the paper, writes "z" (tongue is sticking out of mouth, brow creased) repeats process: "p-i-z-z-a! Like in `Mark'!"

Reflection

Mark does not typically choose to engage in writing activities. Mark struggles when forming letters, and his effort was evident as he stuck out his tongue and slowly formed each letter. This is also one of the few times I have heard him naming letters. Mark shared his sign with the class during sharing time and the entire class applauded. Mark beamed!

For Further Reading

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